Respectable Drinkers, Sensible Drinking, Serious Leisure: Single-Malt Whisky Enthusiasts and the Moral Panic of Irresponsible Others

Abstract

In the public discourse of policy-makers and journalists, drinkers of (excessive) alcohol are portrayed either as irresponsible, immoral deviants, or as gullible victims. In other words, the public discourse engenders a moral panic about alcohol-crazed individuals, who become what Cohen (1972) identifies as folk devils: the Other, abusing alcohol to create anti-social disorder. However, alcohol-drinking was, is and continues to be an everyday practice in the leisure lives of the majority of people in the United Kingdom. In this research paper, I want to explore the serious leisure of whisky tasting to provide a counter to the myth of the alcohol-drinker as folk devil, to try to construct a new public discourse of sensible drinking. I will draw on ethnographic work at whisky tastings alongside interviews and analysis of on-line discourses. I show that participation in whisky-tasting events creates a safe space in which excessive amounts of alcohol are consumed, yet the norms of the particular habitus ensure that such drinking never leads to misbehaviour. In doing so, however, I will note that the respectability of whisky drinking is associated with its masculine, white, privileged habitus – the folk devil becomes someone else, someone Other.

Keywords

Alcohol; Habermas; leisure; whisky

Introduction

If the British media and the discourse among the main political parties is any guide to the state of the Habermasian public sphere, there is a seemingly communicative consensus about the evils of alcohol drinking. From tabloid to broadsheet to rolling news channels, state officials, health experts, academics (for example, see Room, 2004) and politicians condemn 'excessive' alcohol drinking (Jayne, Valentine and Holloway, 2008). But this consensus, while appearing the result of a communicatively rational discussion, has all the makings of an instrumentalised moral panic designed to shift focus away from the machinations of global capitalism: the corporate interests in Government policy-making and the desire of the State to distract its citizens from the shifts in power upwards away from the democratic, communicative life-world.

In this paper, I explore the serious leisure activity of single-malt whisky tasting, whisky collecting and whisky 'fandom' to provide a counter narrative to the myth of the alcohol-drinker as folk devil, to try to construct a new public discourse of sensible drinking. Single-malt whisky is whisky made in one distillery from malt, as opposed to other grains. For many years, single-malt whiskies were rarely sold and marketed by the whisky industry – instead, single-malt whiskies were predominantly mixed with grain whisky to make blends such as the Famous Grouse or Bell's. These blends were a part of a modern, successful, globalising industry, and blends still account for the majority of volume sales across the world of whisky – but by the 1990s whisky companies started to sell single-malt whiskies as a more 'authentic' brand, driven partly by enthusiasts expressing a preference for single-malts and marketing teams eager to charge higher premiums for single-malt whisky

(Spracklen, 2011). Whisky enthusiasts can collect rare single-malt whiskies, visit distilleries, compare the taste of different expressions from the same distillery, and attend regular festivals, commercial tastings and discuss their whisky knowledge on-line – single-malt whisky (and rare blends and single grains) have become part of the wider 'slow food' movement, with the tastings resembling those organised by the wine industry (Bertella, 2011)

The research in this paper is partly reflective of my own ethnographic involvement in whisky tastings over a period of two years, and my own position as a whisky enthusiast. The research draws on data gathered on-line and interviews with whisky-drinkers who attend tastings and those who just collect and/or enjoy drinking single-malt whisky. In the next section of the paper, I develop a theoretical framework about leisure that uses some Bourdieusian ideas (see Bourdieu, 1986) but is essentially aligned with Habermas. I then discuss the policy context and the literature on drinking-as-leisure, before briefly describing my methodological approach. Then I present three sections of analysis: one drawing on my ethnographic data, one using my interview data and one using data found on-line. I will show that participation in whisky-tasting events and whisky-drinking creates a safe space in which excessive amounts of alcohol are consumed, yet the norms of the particular *habitus* ensure that such drinking never leads to misbehaviour. In doing so, however, I will note that the respectability of whisky drinking is associated with its masculine, white, privileged *habitus* – the folk devil becomes someone else, someone Other.

Theoretical Framework

Bob Stebbins has identified a kind of leisure activity he defines as 'serious leisure': an activity in which individuals become dedicated to the activity itself, or which

becomes an unpaid career for the individuals (Stebbins, 2009). Stebbins is primarily thinking of the commitment people make to physical leisure activities such as climbing, which is rarely something done in a casual, *ad hoc* manner – or team sports such as rugby. But the concept of serious leisure can be removed from the psychology of leisure motivation and be applied in a looser sense to sociological analyses of leisure in its broadest sense. Individuals spend money and time on the leisure activities they enjoy because they identify a sense of self and a sense of community or belonging in that particular leisure activity. In our late modern society, serious leisure in this sociological sense can be used to resist the rationalization of the workplace and the alienation associated with modernity: leisure lifestyles serve as a place of agency and self-realisation, whether individuals choose to be a fan of football or modern dance. Leisure is a place where individuals seek the liminal and the authentic, where they create liquid identities and intentionalities (Blackshaw, 2010; Rojek, 2010); or as Ken Roberts puts it, it is where people can be inconsequential (Roberts, 2011). In leisure, following Williams (1977), individuals adopt dominant and emerging cultural norms over taste, or choose to resist norms through the preservation of residual cultures. Following Bourdieu (1986), leisure is a key site in the formation of *habitus*, and a place where cultural capital can be accrued: a place where intersections of class, gender, nation and racialised identities converge. However, leisure theorists have also shown that the agency of choosing one form of leisure over another is never a free choice (Bramham, 2006): the decision to choose football instead of dance or whisky is, in modernity, the product of social structures, social inequalities, and the dominance of global capitalism. So tourists who visit Scotland in search of authentic whisky distilleries have been

tricked by a 'make-believe' Scottishness and a marketing sleight-of-hand into thinking they are making a discerning choice (Spracklen, 2011).

Leisure, then, is something of a paradox – on the one hand, it is by definition something to do with our free choices, away from the grind of the workplace, something that allows us to show off our individuality and the communities and cultures with which we identify ourselves. On the other hand, leisure has become part of the structures of modernity, one other place where we are given false choices or fooled into thinking we are free by the hegemonic powers that enslave us (Gramsci, 1971). The way to resolve this paradox is provided by the work of Jurgen Habermas.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1962) explores the historical origins of the Enlightenment and its role on the development of the public sphere. For Habermas, the public sphere is the part of society that emerges as a result of these greater liberties: people meet in coffee shops to discuss politics and philosophy; they read newspapers and political manifestoes; and they identify themselves with the public, the people who have freedom and education to think for themselves and to demand more rights from the emerging nation-states they live in. In his later work, Habermas warns of the dangers of losing the public sphere and civil society and the threats posed to the public sphere by late modernity's twin evils: the bureaucratic nation-state and global capitalism. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Habermas, 1985) he describes the different ways in which the idea of modernity becomes an all-encompassing shroud, befogging the reason of the public sphere. In *Time of Transitions* (Habermas, 2001) he sees reason under attack from new forms of totalitarianism such as religious fundamentalism and nationalism. The weakening of this settlement and the growing globalisation of

power is, for Habermas, a troubling symptom of the loss of the public sphere. When decisions on fiscal policies are made to serve the profit-making of off-shore banks and unaccountable trans-national corporations, something is clearly dysfunctional in the public sphere.

Communicative rationality for Habermas is emergent, contingent on actors and action, and dependent on consensus over the hermeneutics of language. Furthermore, communicative action takes place in what Habermas calls the lifeworld, which 'comprises a stock of shared assumptions and background knowledge, of shared reasons on the basis of which agents may reach consensus' (Finlayson, 2004: 52). Ideally, the lifeworld is constructed out of communicative rationality, which leads to principles of progress, fairness and ethics being part of that world. So Habermas argues in his analysis of discourse ethics and morality: the lifeworld is where reason and discourse shape laws about equality, for example, which can be seen in the way in which racial discrimination has been slowly challenged and criminalised in many liberal democracies (Habermas, 1983, 1991). Against the lifeworld of communicative action and rationality, Habermas (1984, 1987) presents in *The Theory of Communicative Action* what he calls the system: a symbolic construction that is created entirely from the workings of instrumentality on modernity. Instrumentality is purposive rationality and action, things done and ways of seeing the world imposed on us by the goal-seeking behaviour of actors and institutions that wish to limit our choice and our ability to get in the way of their goal-seeking.

Habermas' communicative rationality and instrumentality can be used to understand the meaning and purpose of leisure. The tension between communicative rationality and instrumentality is used by Morgan (2006) in his book *Why Sports*

Morally Matter to make a justification for the importance of sports participation. Morgan is concerned with the professionalization of modern sport and the way in which modern sport has become driven by commerce. This is, he argues, a bad thing for the ethics of sport – but it is not the end of sport as an ethical sphere. Morgan argues that there is still the potential for sports participation to be something that instils social, moral and political values. This, he says, is due to the communicatively active nature of sports participation: people choose to take part in sports, choose to be communicative in their engagement in sport, and choose to adhere to internal rules about fair play. In *The Meaning and Purpose of Leisure*, I (attempt to challenge postmodern theories of leisure, and reconcile debates about agency and structure in leisure studies (Spracklen, 2009). Habermas is drawn upon to explain the so-called 'paradox of leisure' – that it is clearly related to agency but also a product of instrumentality. I argue leisure is something essentially communicative in nature, but that communicative nature has been undermined by the emergence of instrumental forms of leisure: leisure that is commercialized and commodified, which is provided by the State or by trans-national corporations to keep consumers docile (but content). Spracklen draws on examples from modern sport, pop music and the tourism industry to show that leisure activities at this moment in late modernity are sites for communicative resistance and instrumental colonisation: so, for example, 'extreme metal' music fans use their music scene to find communicative space to resist instrumentality, but they are also constrained by the hegemonic discourse of the music industry.

Public Sphere – Context and Drinking-as-Leisure

Robinson and Kenyon (2009) show that public moral outrage and hypocrisy over alcohol drinking in this country is not a recent phenomenon: in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, politicians, journalists, academics and Christian moralisers campaigned strongly against the availability of cheap alcohol and its dangerous effect on the poor (who were caricatured as being unable to drink in a responsible manner). In the last twenty years, however, moral concerns about alcohol-drinking and the impact of such activity on individual and societal wellbeing have become the dominant way of thinking about alcohol (Room, 2004) – despite the pressure from the alcohol industry against regulation (Jayne, Valentine and Holloway, 2008; Robinson and Kenyon, 2009) and the hypocrisy of ex-members of infamous Oxford drinking clubs like the Bullingdon telling others how much to drink. All political parties advocate tough action against those who drink excessively, and there is a political consensus that alcohol drinking should be reduced and made 'disrespectable' in the same way cigarette smoking has been challenged (Jayne, Valentine and Holloway, 2008). Policy is driven by a combination of the health lobby and the morality of the *Daily Mail*. The public sphere is dominated by a narrative of 'failed' drinkers, rather like the 'failed' consumers of Bauman (2000) – people who do not have the power and knowledge to act 'sensibly' when consuming products and making lifestyle choices in the liquid modern. In the public discourse of policy-makers and journalists, drinkers of (excessive) alcohol are portrayed either as irresponsible, immoral deviants or as gullible victims (see for example, UK Primer Minister David Cameron's recent moralising against the excessive drinking because of its supposed danger to the health of the nation and the economy, and the cost to the NHS: 'David Cameron vows to tackle binge drinking 'scandal'', on-line at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-17036826, accessed 15 February 2012). In

other words, the public discourse engenders a moral panic about alcohol-crazed individuals, who become – despite Critcher's (2011) argument that alcohol drinkers are not a folk devil in the same league as terrorists or paedophiles - what Cohen (1972) identifies as folk devils: the Other, abusing alcohol to create anti-social disorder and long-term health problems.

However, alcohol-drinking was, is and continues to be an everyday practice in the leisure lives of the majority of people in the United Kingdom (Spracklen, 2011). Alcohol has always been a part of the everyday leisure lives of British people, and has dominated social and power relationships since the Middle Ages – but the advent of modernity saw the relationship change to a capitalist one. The development in the late eighteenth-century of industrial factories producing beer and gin led to a proliferation of drinking-houses in London. The factories could operate on a commercial scale because of the increasing application of technological advances in the production process, such as the use of steam-engines. Gin, in particular, proved cheap to make on an industrial scale once the technology of distillation allowed it – and, as a consequence, it became the subject of the first modern moral panic. Because of the cheap retail price and the high alcohol content, gin became associated with poor leisure choices: drunken idleness, cockfighting and bear-baiting, casual sex, gambling, fighting and petty crime (Critcher, 2011). Drinking, in London, had become a mass cultural pastime (Greenaway, 2003; Borsay, 2005) – and although the State tried to legislate against it, alcohol became a fixed part of the urban landscape, not just in London but in most other industrial cities in Europe.

The drinking of alcohol is a key leisure ritual, and in sport as in any other part of leisure where sociality is important, drinking and buying drinks is an accepted

part of the subcultural practice. Alcohol's social function is evident in the cultural history of Europe and the United Kingdom: in the work of Mass Observation, for example, the pubs of 1930s and 1940s northern England provide spaces where men and women of similar classes are seen finding community and solidarity through rituals of buying rounds and indulging in light-hearted banter (Hubble, 2010). Drinking is part of the modern, Western quotidian – both a social lubricant and a matter of mundane habit (see the descriptions of the different drinking patterns in Newcastle in Hollands and Chatterton, 2002).

Methods

This research follows a Discourse Tracing approach (LeGreco and Tracy, 2009; Spracklen, 2011). Discourse Tracing is a qualitative method of analysis through which it becomes possible to develop a 'thick' understanding of a given research focus. The researcher traces patterns across a range of qualitative data sources, developing in-depth knowledge of the object of the study, which in turn is used to make the multiple re-tracings of discourse, narrative, symbols, myths and attitudes. The focus of this research project is whisky-tasting events and whisky-drinking. Whisky-tasting events are where single-malt whisky enthusiasts are given a guided tasting of a number of whiskies. In previous research on whisky I examined whisky tourism and the meaning of authenticity, using a range of ethnographic fieldwork and on-line ethnography (Spracklen, 2011). This earlier project also used Discourse Tracing but the nature of the discourses traced was different (as the data collection varied to the approach in the current paper). For the purposes of this research, I have reflected in an (auto)ethnographic manner on my own experiences of going to these whisky tasting sessions, drawing on two years of attending ten events. In addition, I

have interviewed eight whisky drinkers recruited through snowball sampling (whisky enthusiasts and those who have attended tastings), using a semi-structured interview technique; and analysed the opinions of whisky enthusiasts published on a number of publicly available on-line blogs and forums, using both purposive searching and periodic lurking over four years.

Ethnographic Reflections

Springbank tasting, Feb 2012 – a large crowd of older, white men, leavened with a sprinkling of women (all here with male companions, husbands or partners?) and some younger, trendy types (glasses, humorous t-shirts).Our speaker is wearing a kilt, and describes one of the whiskies as tasting like Barr's American Cream Soda. In between drinks we get the story of Springbank – authentic history and mythology of timelessness (Springbank still uses malting shed to malt its own barleys, the family of the original founder still owns the distillery)

The whisky tastings I have attended have all been organised by a wine and spirits shop in a northern town. It specialises in whisky and has run these tastings on a regular basis since 2004, beginning with two tastings each year and expanding to four each year, each with 80-90 paying guests. In the period of this research I have been to eight tastings, missing two in the period of study: Bruichladdich (Scotland); Amrut (India); Bowmore (Scotland); Douglas Laing and Co (Independent Bottlers of Scottish Whisky); Glendronach and BenRiach (Scotland); Pernod Ricard (six Scottish whiskies from their portfolio of brands and distilleries); Springbank (Scotland); and Cooley (Ireland). In general, all these whisky-tasting sessions are polite. We drink lots (6-10 generous measures in the tastings and for most of the people there a pint or two beforehand to warm up) and we are eventually quite

drunk, like our hosts. No one exhibits any anti-social behaviour, no-one acts as if they are about to be sick (though of course people might get sick away from the venue). There is some rowdiness (cheers, jokes) but we internalise the good behaviour of the people around us. For example, at the Cooley tasting the commercial director taking us through his portfolio of whiskies is keen to make jokes at the expense of Scottish whisky but his patter is constantly interrupted by good-natured banter and complicated questions from the crowd. All the time, despite the amount of alcohol consumed and the rising level of jocularity, most of the crowd are keen to take notes, compare the smell and taste of different samples, and listen politely or talk quietly. Whenever the talking gets too much, our hosts from the shop are quick to stand up and shout at people to quieten down – the manager even jokes that he has a list of people who are barred, but we all cheer at him before shutting up. For the Scottish distillers and companies there is an easy ride – they do not need to convince anyone in the room of their authenticity, fine taste and origins. Amrut and Cooley have to win over sceptics, those who are convinced the only proper whisky is Scottish whisky – they do this with some measure of success, but there are people at my table on both nights that are convinced neither India nor Ireland has anything that comes close to a renowned Scottish distillery such as Ardbeg or Macallan.

Douglas Laing tasting, Nov 2010 - conspicuous consumption – the man next to me has bought hundreds of pounds of whisky. He is very nice and humble when we chat but he has just bought a bottle of everything. We learn to be snobs about single grains – they taste nice and they are expensive.

The whisky tastings are of course a commercial enterprise. We pay a premium to attend the tastings, and the shop brings bottles of the whiskies that we taste to the venue, so we can buy as many as we like (at a reduced price). We have

already proven our good taste by attending the event (we are reminded of this by all the speakers, who encourage us to explore the subtle differences between each whisky, and who constantly remind us that whisky is a spirit that takes time - three years at least – to mature). We can visibly demonstrate that with our choices of whisky at the sales table: buying the higher priced single malts or single grains rather than the blends, or justifying our purchases to each other over our post-tasting dinner. At each tasting I have attended, the people in the room are almost exclusively white, predominantly male and the majority look older than I am: the older white men seem to be divided equally between retirees and executive-looking types. Most of us feel able to spend money without worrying too much about the cost, but not all – there are a handful of retirees and others with more working-class accents who do only buy one bottle or none at all. As for the predominance of men at the tastings, that constructs a heteronormative value to the etiquette of tasting, which aligns with the norms of hegemonic masculinity: the majority of the men and about half of the women in the room drink all their whisky (the other women leave some whisky in the glasses at the end of the evening), even though whisky expert Jim Murray advises 'proper' tastings need to enforce the rule of spitting out the whisky to keep the taste sensors alert; and there is a marked reluctance to water down cask-strength measures (ABV 55-65%), even though doing so – to 'unlock' flavours masked by the high alcohol content - is recommended by every person invited to speak to us at the tastings. I count myself as someone who chooses to drink the cask-strength measures neat, even though I know it is not logical for me to do so – but then again, the cask-strength measures always come at the end of the evening, when my ability to act rationally is reduced by the drink and the 'clubbable' atmosphere.

Cooley tasting, Apr 2012 – our speaker says Cooley has been bought out by Beam, an American corporation. He then says this means all Irish whisky is owned by a big multinational – Diageo owns Bushmills, and he says Pernod Ricard, the French, own Jameson's. He stresses the word French as if he is swearing, and the people in the room respond. Does anybody in the room like the French? he asks. I put my hand up but there is a round of booing.

My liberal inclination to like France comes from a love of French cinema, an interest in French philosophy and a slight envy of the status of culture and education in French society. This particular cultural capital sets me at odds with my fellow whisky enthusiasts. Their public display of displeasure at all things French may have been an over-reaction, and some of the jeers may have been due to peer pressure, but the simple fact is that it was perfectly normal for the crowd to express mild xenophobia against France and the French. The jeering at the Cooley tasting was not the first time this had happened – supposedly jocular jeering about France emerged when Pernod Ricard came to the whisky-tasting evenings. There is, then, a tension in this particular whisky-enthusiast circle. People are being expressively communicative in their desire to demonstrate Bourdieusian taste, through selecting whisky over vodka or gin, and choosing single malts over cheap blends. But the instrumental world of English middle culture emerges in instinctive reactions against France (along with Germany the country associated most with the foreign Europe 'beyond the channel' of the European Union) that bind the whisky enthusiasts to the political sphere of Middle England.

That said (or perhaps, because of that), there is among the crowd at these evenings a shared suspicion of trans-national corporations: Diageo, one of the world's biggest drinks companies, which owns the most Scottish distilleries, is

regularly raised in conversations and questions to the speakers, and inevitably it is used as an example of overly-aggressive takeovers, rationalizations and marketing strategies. While people drink whisky owned by trans-national corporations, including Diageo, they prefer to celebrate smaller whisky producers – independent bottlers are cheered as mavericks in an industry of global brands; and independent distillers such as Bruichladdich, Springbank and Glendronach/BenRiach seem to be able to do no wrong. These three, when they come to the whisky-tasting evening, make a big sales pitch to us that explicitly positions these companies against the faceless marketing executives or computer-operating process managers at Diageo: Bruichladdich is a working Victorian distillery saved by whisky buffs and Islay locals, and it employs dozens of local Islay people; Springbank remains unchanged since the nineteenth century, is situated in the deprived and unfashionable Campbelltown, and is seemingly reluctant to sell its whisky; and Glendronach/BenRiach is a company that now owns two distilleries discarded by the big companies. While the whisky enthusiasts at the tastings attempt to demonstrate they are able to express taste and preference objectively, regardless of the financial arrangements behind the distillery or the location, they inevitably favour whiskies with romantic stories of salvation, or those with 'genuine' traditions in romantic locations.

Whisky Enthusiasts - Interviews

Eight whisky enthusiasts were interviewed for this project: mostly middle/upper-middle class, all white, mostly male (one female respondent, one working-class respondent). Two of the eight (Respondent A and Respondent B) were a heterosexual couple in their late twenties/early thirties. The other six were older

(Respondents C to H). The demographic profile of the respondents was designed specifically to map the demographic profile of those who attended the whisky tastings. As respondent C identified about single-malt whisky:

> It definitely is more of a middle-class drink. That's down to price for one, for another that's about knowledge. Single malts haven't really been marketed to the mass market.

Respondent F agreed:

> Some snobbishness about whisky – lots of money at the high end, pushing the prices up… lots of one-up-man's-ship about collecting. It's not just single malts, it's certain whiskies over others – being able to buy something at £120 rather than something at £35 from Tesco.

All the respondents collected whisky - mainly single-malt but some single grains and luxury blends whisky and drank whisky on a regular basis: usually daily on an evening at home. The enthusiasts recognised that some whisky was for drinking on a daily basis, and some whisky in their collections, rarer bottles and those bottled at cask strength, were for special occasions: as Respondent B said, 'the Glenmorangie's for sipping, for guests, but the [distillery edition] Oban is my treat'. Drinking whisky, then, was something they did to relax, by themselves or in the company of close family and friends. Two of them did say they drank whisky at home on occasions to become drunk, but most of the respondents saw whisky-drinking as something pleasurable – the 'taste' of a good single malt – and relaxing – after a long day.

All the respondents viewed sampling and collecting single malts as an expression of their good taste – all argued strongly for their ability to differentiate good, 'proper' whiskies, especially single malts, from one another. And all claimed

to be wise to the marketing of single malts and the 'dodgy' claims about authenticity made by some companies. As Respondent H explained:

> There's hype about some whiskies and some distilleries, you know really over-priced. You're paying for the packaging and it really surprises me that people fall for that, buying a whisky that's so mediocre they [the company] have to need to, y'know, all that like never judge a book by its cover, never buy a whisky cos it comes in a shiny box.

Respondent D echoed the comments about marketing:

> Look at the advertising and the budgets the big boys have, Glenfiddich, Glenlivet, Diageo… they have to sell millions to balance the books, just like any brands these days. They have all these warehouses full of maturing stock and have to shift it somehow – fair play to them but I prefer to drink whiskies that speak for themselves.

There is a communicative rationality at work in the positioning of these whisky enthusiasts as serious, informed and sceptical consumers. They believe themselves to be knowledgeable about the whisky industry and the trends in whisky collecting: they have accumulated the correct cultural capital to enable them to exist within the whisky field. They believe themselves to be aware of the tricks of the market and are cynical of multi-national corporations trying to sell them inauthentic whiskies. All eight have been to whisky distilleries in Scotland, and half of them have made two or more trips to Scotland specifically to visit distilleries. Six of the respondents have attended whisky tastings or larger whisky festivals, and the other two are interested in going to one. All believed whisky-tastings and whisky drinking more generally was 'respectable', something that was freely chosen and expressive of some communicative choice against the instrumental rationality of mass culture

and global capitalism. In drinking whisky, they were positioning themselves against the excessive drinking, the commodified drinking, of anti-social Others:

> You learn from going to tastings that is okay to take your time, to enjoy the taste… (Respondent D)
>
> There's never any trouble at these [whisky] events.
>
> (Respondent H)
>
> You don't hear about whisky drinkers getting into fights in town. Drinking whisky is about enjoying the drink, understanding and respecting all of it.
>
> (Respondent F)

Finally, none of the respondents agreed with Jim Murray's assertion that individuals tasting more than one whisky in one session should spit out the whisky instead of swallowing it, but there was an even split on whether water should be added to whisky. For both of the younger couple and for two of the older respondents, watering down a cask-strength whisky to release more flavours seemed a sensible thing to do. But the other four respondents said they never watered down cask-strength whisky, preferring to drink it at its full-strength even though they acknowledge some of the flavour is lost. As Respondent E put it: 'I like the rawness of a cask-strength, it's whisky straight from the barrel, it's how it's meant to taste'.

Whisky Enthusiasts - Conversations On-Line

On-line whisky discussion forums have been in part the subject of previous research (Spracklen, 2011). In this new research project, I explored a number of European whisky web-sites to investigate the dominant discourses around whisky drinking/collecting and whisky tasting: whiskywhiskywhisky.com, which includes a discussion forum; dramming.com, a self-styled independent blog; masterofmalt.com,

a retailer that also hosts a blog; and caskstrength.net, a blog that is styled to appeal to youngish male urbanites. Unsurprisingly, given the nature of these websites, the discourses around whisky drinking project a positivity and excitement about the whisky industry and the aesthetic pleasure of drinking a fine whisky (whether a deluxe blend, a single malt or a single grain). Caskstrength.net pushes a hip portrayal of sampling whiskies and cocktails and travelling the world, and the two bloggers who run the site are always fulsome in their tastings of rare whiskies. On whiskywhiskywhisky.com there is a competition between posters to demonstrate their superior knowledge and fine aesthetic judgement about different whiskies, with people using their avatars and signatures to publicly show their admiration for obscure or independent distilleries/expressions. Masterofmalt.com reviews whiskies that are usually available to buy from their shop, but they also comment on rare releases that will be out of the price range of most of their readers, or unavailable to the general public due to their rarity (most expensive whiskies never reach general sale as they are bought up by insiders and investors, who then re-sell on e-Bay with high mark ups – raising prices even higher - or who store their 'wealth' away like Dutch tulips). Dramming.com is unlike the other two blogs. Although the blogger who runs it likes his whisky, raves about the distilleries he admires and supports the whisky industry in general, he is also very critical of some of the practices in whisky: he is cynical of some of the marketing claims, suspicious of trends and hypes over rare whiskies, and critical of whisky enthusiasts who buy into the myths of the industry.

On whisky tasting, there are two general positions on the whisky forums and blogs – whisky-tasting is 'serious' but also whisky-tasting is 'fun'. Sometimes these characteristics go together but often there is a tension. The on-line debates construct

and define taste and the norms and values of the serious whisky drinker. For instance, on whiskywhiskywhisky.com there were some interesting comments, the result of when someone posted as list of fifteen different whiskies that they were going to taste with a few friends (in the 'Whisky tasting with a few friends' discussion on whiskywhiskywhisky.com, on-line at http://www.whiskywhiskywhisky.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=12&t=4758, first post 19 March 2011, 20.00, accessed 3 February 2012). One response (20 March 2011, 17.26, from someone identified as Malt-Teaser), was very clear about the danger of having too many whiskies to drink (all quotes *sic.*): 'I'd say this is too many to really enjoy or tastes them all in one tasting'. The implication was getting too drunk would spoil the enjoyment of the tasting. Another related pair of responses from the same person (20 March 2011, 18.14 and 19.03, from MacDeffe) argued otherwise:

> I would consider 15 a wee tasting… Remember, this is a tasting session, not a scientific analytic study. You want to sit around a group of friends and enjoy your self, have a good time and compare the drams. If you really want to go into depths of a dram I need to taste it many times over many days. I can often spend 1-2 hours on 1-2cl's. But hey, I drink like that when I am alone.
>
> This led to a response from Olikli (20 March 2011, 19.13):
>
> When I 'taste' a whisky, I want to find out enough about it that I am able to publish a tasting note on my blog. What you describe I would prefer to call a casual "dramming" session.

For MacDeffe and Olikli, the point of whisky tasting in company was to be sociable, to get drunk, and to enjoy whisky and the good company. But they also

recognised the importance (to them) of carefully analysing whiskies in a long 'scientific' session, which would help them with their own 'research'.

Discussion

The whisky industry - like the drinks industry - is a product of Western modernity. Whiskies became commodities at the end of the nineteenth century, produced in a rationalising network of modernised distilleries, warehouses, vatting plants, regional agents and sales offices. Through the last century and into this one, the whisky industry has ebbed and flowed with global fashions, with blended whisky becoming a standard spirit found everywhere alcohol is sold and consumed (Spracklen, 2011). Single-malt whisky is an expression of the Habermasian instrumentality of this industry. There is no pure whisky produced free from the balance-sheets of capitalism: every distillation is created with the demands of the market in mind, or rather, the expected demand (as whisky needs to mature for three years); every blend and single-cask whisky is sold to recoup profit and increase market share. The logic of instrumentality is evident in the recent history of Scottish distilleries. In the early 1980s a number of distilleries were closed and demolished altogether - with no care for traditions and local economies - as multi-national corporations countered a surplus of whisky in the market. But when the markets changed the corporations changed. Single-malts started to be sold directly to the market in significant numbers because corporations saw the success of some smaller distillers – United Distillers, the precursor of Diageo, branded six of its distilleries as 'Classic Malts' and invested resources marketing these distilleries as being representative of something authentic about Scottish single malt. Such marketing strategies continued into this century, with blends sold in emerging regions such as South America, India and China, and

single malts sold at a premium to 'discerning' drinkers in established regions. In the last ten years, new companies have entered the market, opening new distilleries or re-opening closed ones; and the corporations have responded with ever-more exclusive ranges of single malts.

Whisky enthusiasts are aware of this but still spend their money building up collections of their own – and they are still happy to buy single malts produced by corporations like Diageo. In this respect, they buy into the instrumentality of their leisure activity, becoming Habermasian consumers of carefully monetised commodities. However, these enthusiasts do find some agency to use whisky drinking and whisky tasting as a communicative space. In the modern drinks industry, the hyper-commodification of global capitalism is evident in the packaging of lagers and flavoured cocktails aimed at young consumers – choosing to drink whisky, against the prevailing fashions and against the marketing campaigns for 'cooler' alcohol products, is a sign of communicative reason. Whisky enthusiasts are not drinking whisky to get drunk, they are drinking whisky because they like the taste and like to expand their knowledge of different whiskies. Engaging in discussions on-line and at tasting sessions about the relative merits of different whiskies is also evidence of a Habermasian public sphere, albeit a fragile one that is susceptible to colonisation from the industry.

In creating this public sphere where leisure is communicative, whisky enthusiasts are also constructing a particular Bourdieusian field, shaped by cultural capital about whisky and the white, middle-class *habitus* from which most whisky enthusiasts come. On on-line discourses and in informal conversations about whisky, status within the field is acquired by showing off one's rare and pure taste, one's distinction made free from the touch of marketing and hype. Enthusiasts who have

never been able to afford to drink a wide range of rare single malts can always bluff, performing the role of the informed insider in some Goffmanesque play, but there is a danger in such pretence. Status within the field comes from actually having the rare bottles of Port Ellen in your collection, by being able to report that you have tasted them, or from visiting every distillery on Islay – but only those with economic capital can spend it. So the field and its associated *habitus* remain a site of elite privilege, associated with hegemonic notions of social identity, even if there is an associated communicative space.

This research does not present a generalised account of all single-malt whisky enthusiasts and all single-malt whisky drinkers. The case study and the discourse tracing approach only allow a sketch of some people's thoughts, conversations and actions when it comes to the buying and drinking of whisky. That said, the research presented in this paper points towards a new approach to thinking about and the drinking of alcohol in modern society. Drinking alcohol is a part of many people's leisure lives. It is something people choose to do, something with which they fill their time and spend their money, something that allows them to meet friends or relax or feel a part of something bigger (Hollands and Chatterton, 2002; Robinson and Kenyon, 2009). Many of the whisky enthusiasts on this research situated their own drinking habits within the moralising discourse of public policy, legitimising their own alcohol consumption but being strongly critical of the teenage (pseudo) folk devils of the tabloid press (Cohen, 1972; Critcher, 2011). But the internal rules of whisky tasting suggest that it is possible for modern humans to drink heavily but responsibly, getting drunk and getting merry but refraining from 'anti-social' actions. The policy debate will not change as a result of a handful of research papers questioning the norms of the limited moralities preached by Government and

newspapers. But academics interested in alcohol-as-leisure need to move on from the stereotypes of abstinence propaganda – that alcohol-drinkers are incapable of control, that they are incapable of rational choice, that they are a danger to their own health.

Conclusions

We can see whisky-drinking and whisky collecting/tasting is a leisure practice challenges the moral discourse of alcohol-drinking in this country. It is a leisure practice that is communicative in nature – following Habermas, we can see that people construct their own rules, negotiate their involvement and attempt to keep a distance from the instrumentality of global capitalism. There is a confidence and assurance about their drinking and their collecting. However, the whisky-drinking *habitus* is one where access to cultural capital (*pace* Bourdieu) remains (almost) exclusive – whisky collecting defines taste and belonging, but it also defines hegemonic whiteness, masculinity and socio-economic status.

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